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ABSTRACT

This issue of a monthly serial publication of the National Education Goals Panel (NEGP), which is available only online in PDF Format, examines efforts underway in Colorado, Maryland, and Montgomery County, Maryland to increase student achievement in reading (related to Goal 3 of the NEGP). After an overview, it discusses Colorado's efforts to produce fluent readers by third grade, focusing on state legislation establishing standards. It then discusses Maryland's efforts to boost reading achievement, noting that the state won a Reading Excellence Act grant to improve the reading achievement of students living in poverty. It also discusses the reading initiative of Montgomery County, Maryland, which focused on teacher and principal training to help all students learn to read. Background information on the NEGP and nine sources of information are presented in sidebars. (RS)

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NEGP MONTHLY

A monthly indepth look at states and communities and their efforts to reach the National Eductaion Goals
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- Maryland
- Montgomery County, Maryland

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FOR THE LOVE OF READING

Goal 3 of the National Education Goals Panel aims to improve student achievement. While reading is not among the challenging subject matters identified in the Goal, it is the skill underlying success in those subjects. Students who lack the ability to read with understanding clearly will not master the content in science, history, geography or any subject matter.

This Monthly examines efforts underway in Colorado, Maryland and Montgomery County, Maryland, to increase student achievement in reading. Specifically, the two states and county share as their goal reading literacy by grade 3.

All areas stress a need for a "balanced" approach to reading, strong professional development and standards aligned with assessments to instill in children a love for reading and the ability to do so at high levels.

Overview

The dawn of a new economy, one that values an educated and literate workforce, has awakened educators and policymakers to the importance of promoting children's early reading successes. Across the country this summer, teachers participated in professional development activities that connected emerging reading research with classroom practice. Many university education professors reviewed and revamped courses that teach prospective teachers how to help young children acquire reading skills. Concepts such as phonological awareness and phoneme segmentation became part of the vocabulary in state legislatures and governors' mansions.

From President Clinton's Read America to sundry local programs designed to beef up classroom language arts programs, the start of a new school year means more time spent helping children "break the code" and fostering a lifelong love of reading. This year, the National Education Goals Panel also is stressing the importance of reading by issuing a report this fall titled *Reading Achievement State by State 1999* and by releasing

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with it a case study of high and improving reading achievement in Connecticut. The case study explores state programs and local practices throughout Connecticut that educators identify as helping the state reach top student achievement in reading.

Goal 3 of the National Education Goals aims to ensure that all students will become competent in challenging subject matter. Although Goal 3 does not mention reading specifically, the acquisition of reading skills, including comprehension and writing, is essential for student achievement in all subject matter denoted in Goal 3. This NEGP Monthly highlights efforts underway in Colorado, Maryland and Montgomery County, Maryland, to improve student reading achievement, the first step students must take to reach high standards in other subject matter.

Officials from the two states underscore the importance of standards aligned with assessments to ensure accountability to achieve increased student performance in reading. Teacher professional development in research-based strategies to help children develop literacy skills also is a critical component of successful state programs. Reading efforts spearheaded by these states and Montgomery County, Maryland, stress the need for a "balanced" approach to reading – one that offers phonological awareness, direct instruction in phonics, a literature-rich environment and writing, among other elements.

The overriding goal in Colorado, Maryland and Montgomery County is to produce fluent readers by third grade. Following are some specifics on how state and county leaders are working to achieve this goal.

Colorado

Only Connecticut had a significantly higher percentage of 4th graders at or above Proficient on NAEP than Colorado. The percentage of Colorado's public school 4th graders who met the Goals Panel's performance standard in reading rose form 25% in 1992, to 34% in 1998. Colorado surpasses the U.S. average, which stands at 31%, and ranks similarly to 19 other states, including New Hampshire (38%), Massachusetts and Montana (37%), Maine and Minnesota (36%), Iowa (35%) and Kansas and Wisconsin (34%).

Don Watson, director of student assessment for the Colorado Department of Education, attributes much of his state's success to reading and writing standards passed by the legislature and to assessments aligned with the standards.

According to Watson, the legislature passed a set of reading and writing standards in 1993, which the state board of education approved in 1995. In 1996, the legislature passed the Colorado Basic Literacy Act, which requires districts to monitor student reading performance in grades kindergarten through 3. The bill includes a provision that requires schools to consider the student's score on the third-grade reading assessment before moving the child from third- to fourth-grade reading instruction.

The Colorado Department of Education's Web site (www.cde.state.co.us/index_home.htm) provides detailed information on the Colorado Basic Literacy Act and the third-grade reading assessment. The purposes of the act include:

- to promote high literacy standards for all student in kindergarten through third grade;

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- to help all schools improve the educational opportunities for literacy and performance for all students; and
- to ensure that all students are adequately prepared to meet Colorado's Fourth-Grade Reading Standards and Benchmarks

The rules for administration of the Act describe proficiency levels at the kindergarten through third grade. The rules also describe the criteria districts must use to select assessment instruments. For example, local assessments must:

- align with local content standards that meet or exceed the Colorado standards for reading;
- align with the K-3 reading performance descriptions; and
- include multiple measures over time that constitute a body of evidence regarding students' reading performance

The Colorado Basic Literacy Act also mandates each school to develop Individual Literacy Plans for students not reading proficiently at the third-grade level by the end of third grade and to report to state officials the number of students on the Individual Literacy Plans. In addition, decisions about third-grade students' reading proficiency must be based on a "body of evidence" collected over time to "reflect the stages and complexity of reading development."

Watson said that although the state has not developed formal professional development activities in reading, the Department of Education's reading specialists spend "lots of time working with school district coordinators, who work at the local level" to promote improved reading instruction.

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Maryland

Maryland is one of eight states that showed significant improvement since 1992 in 4th-grade reading. The

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percentage of the state's public school students who read at least at the proficient level increased from 24% in 1992, to 29% in 1998, placing the state only slightly below the U.S. average of 31%.

Maryland began its campaign to boost student reading achievement in 1990, when the state began to develop content standards in all core content areas, according to Ron Peiffer, assistant state superintendent, Maryland Department of Education. Peiffer said that standards that relate to the state's reading assessment were written and distributed in 1990, implemented in 1991, with the assessment also beginning in 1991.

"Reading became a full-frontal attack in 1990," said Trudy Collier, chief of language development and early learning branch, Maryland Department of Education, "and it's been with us ever since." Collier noted that the state "modeled outcomes for assessment on NAEP outcomes." For example, the state underscores the importance of not only reading for the literary experience, but also reading for information and reading to perform a task, explained Collier.

Over the summer, the State Board of Education approved the Maryland Content Standards, which specify what students from kindergarten through 12th grade should know and be able to do in four core content areas: English/language arts, math, science and social studies. These standards are expected to provide direction to local school district staff involved in writing curriculum and preparing students for state assessments.

Teacher training is a key component to the state's success, added Collier. She adds that staff development in reading has come from many sources – such as local school systems and state associations like the International Reading Association affiliate. "Success in our state is multi-layered because the Department of Education can't get out to everybody," said Collier. "We rely on other organizations, and, on their own, they have nicely supported our state efforts."

Peiffer noted that Maryland this summer won a $14.2 million grant from the U.S. Department of Education under the new Reading Excellence Act (REA). The grant will be used to improve the reading performance of the state's pre-kindergarten through third graders living in poverty. "The REA offers local school systems the opportunity to engage in extensive needs assessments to determine what they have and what they need to develop reading programs that are research-based," said Collier, the contact for Maryland's REA grant. Maryland's goals for the program are to ensure that:

- Children in targeted schools have the readiness skills and support to learn to read once they enter school;
- Children in targeted schools learn to read by the end of the third grade, meeting standards established in the Maryland English Language Arts Content Standards;
- The instructional practices of teachers and other instructional staff in the targeted schools reflect the best educational practices and arise from scientifically based research.

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Eight school districts in Maryland are eligible to compete for subgrant funds.

State Superintendent of Schools Dr. Nancy Grasmick praised the REA grant. "As a state, we recognize that in order for students to reach their fullest potential, they must, before all else, become strong readers, " she said. "The REA grant will allow us to strengthen reading skills among our most vulnerable early learners – children living in poverty."

Both Collier and Peiffer described the efforts of the Center for Reading Excellence – a partnership among the Maryland State Department of Education, the Kennedy Krieger Institute and Johns Hopkins University. The Center will focus on "professional development and technical assistance to local school systems, direct services to students and their families and serve as a research center for reading excellence," explained Collier.

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Montgomery County, Maryland: Reading Initiative

Over two years ago, the Montgomery County Public School System (MCPSS) responded to pleas from principals who said their teaching staff felt unable to meet the diverse needs of students learning to read by launching a county reading initiative. Initially, the program involved only teachers from four elementary schools. This year all 121 elementary schools with kindergarten, first and second grades are participating in the program.

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What is the National Education Goals Panel?

The National Education Goals Panel is a unique bipartisan body of state and federal officials created in 1990 by President Bush and the nation's Governors to report state and national progress and urge education improvement efforts to reach a set of National Education Goals.

Who serves on the National Education Goals Panel and how are they chosen?

Eight governors, four state legislators, four members of the U.S. Congress, and two members appointed by the President serve on the Goals Panel. Members are appointed by the leadership of the National Governors' Association, the National Conference of State Legislatures, the U.S. Senate and House, and the President.

What does the Goals Panel do?

The Goals Panel has been charged to:

- Report state and national progress toward the National Education Goals.
- Work to establish a system of high academic standards and assessments.
- Identify promising and effective reform strategies.
- Recommend actions for state, federal and local governments to take.
- Build a nationwide, bipartisan consensus to achieve the Goals.

The annual Goals Report and other publications of the Panel are available without charge upon request from the Goals Panel or at its web site www.negp.gov. Publications requests can be made by mail, fax, or e-mail, or Internet.

Teacher *and* principal training is a critical component of the reading initiative. Dr. Priscilla Waynant, reading language arts instructional specialist with the MCPSS, said teachers and principals attended summer afternoon seminars on reading instruction. In the morning, they observed summer-school students being taught reading skills using the same strategies the teachers and principals heard of in the seminars.

Waynant: "It is important for principals to attend our sessions because a school's instructional program goes according to school leadership. Principals who have a foundation in what they should be observing in the classroom know better how to help and support and affirm what teachers are doing. Principals are an important part of our community of learners. Teachers know when principals stand behind them in new practices."

Besides ongoing professional development opportunities for teachers and principals, the MCPSS reading initiative also calls for a reduction in class size during reading instruction. Reading instruction classes in first and second grade must have no more than a 15 to 1 student-teacher ratio. Students spend more time each day in language arts instruction – 90-minute blocks are set aside for reading and writing.

The reading initiative is based on a "balanced" approach to reading instruction, which means teachers use an array of strategies to help children acquire literacy skills – from phonological awareness to a literature-rich environment. The goal is to help students become independent, fluent readers, who read at or above grade level by 3rd grade.

Somerset Elementary School Principal Alfred Sklarew applauds the intensive training and extended time given to reading. "This [90-minute block] is uninterrupted time," he said. "Two teachers will be working in each classroom during this time, which makes it easier to meet the needs of all children." Sklarew also noted his school's emphasis on writing and "Drop Everything and Read" time, which "provides children with an opportunity to read books independently at their own level."

"The beauty of the reading initiative," said Sklarew, "is it benefits all children, advanced readers, students with special-needs and those in the middle. More time on reading and language arts with more teachers means all Somerset students will have the opportunity to strengthen their reading skills and view themselves as good readers."

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From the Library

Burns, Susan and Catherine, Snow. (1998) *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children*. National Academy of Science Press. Washington, D.C.

Burns, Susan and Catherine, Snow. (1998) *Starting Out Right: A Guide to Promoting* Children's *Reading Success*. National Academy of Science Press. Washington, D.C.

Center for the Improvement of Early Reading Achievement. (1997) *Every Child A Reader*. University of Michigan. Ann Arbor, Michigan.

Learning First Alliance. (1998) *Every Child Reading: An Action Plan*. Washington, D.C.

For More Information

America Reads. U.S. Department of Education. 600 Independence Avenue SW. Washington, D.C. 20202. (800)USA-LEARN. www.ed.gov/inits/americareads.

Center for the Improvement of Early Reading Achievement (CIERA). University of Michigan. School of Education. 610 University Avenue. Room 1600. Ann Arbor, Michigan 48109-1259. (734)647-6940. www.ciera.org

International Reading Association. 800 Barksdale Road. P.O. Box 8139. Newark, Delaware 19714-8139. (302)731-1600. www.reading.org

National Education Goals Panel. 1255 22nd Street NW. Suite 502. Washington, D.C. 20037. (202)724-0015. www.negp.gov.

Read Across America. National Education Association. 1201 16th Street NW. Washington, D.C. 20036. (202)822-SEUSS. www.nea.org/readacross.

Waynant pointed out that MCPPS based their reading initiative on work underway in Tennessee, which reduced class size in reading, and Kentucky, which gave principals a stronger role. She praises the reading initiative for bringing "continuity and consistency across the county." Students or teachers who move from one school to another can have the same expectations when it comes to language arts instruction. "The reading initiative has helped build a community of learners within each school, across the county – all with the goal of improving student reading ability," she said.

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